

March 14, 2010

IN THE SEAT BUT NOT THE SONS OF MOSES

MATTHEW 23.1-12

After Jesus enduring the tests of the leadership of Israel and arising victorious, Jesus warns those who follow him against practicing the honor-hungry hypocrisy of the scribes and Pharisees.

Beginning of a new section; a discourse section (23–25). Context: Jesus enters the temple 2x (21.12, 23) and leaves 2x (21.17; 24.1). Relates to OC law house “leprosy” (lit. “striking;” Lev 14.33ff.).

Priest examines the house, removes stones to unclean place (cp. 21.12-13). If he finds leprosy at the 2nd inspection, the whole house is dismantled stone by stone and the stones are taken outside the city (cp. 24.1ff.). This is what will happen to the Temple whose stones (i.e. living stones; people) have been found to have uncleanness.

1. ARE THEY SONS OF MOSES OR PHARAOH? (1-4)

To the crowds and his disciples (1): Jesus’ followers are capable of doing the same things as the scribes and Pharisees. This is why Jesus warns them against it.

Obeying Moses (2-3): Moses’ seat: a position of authority within Israel, esp. in relation to the Law. They are guardians of the Law and have some responsibility in seeing to it that it is obeyed in Israel.

Could be a literal seat in the synagogue. Could also refer to their position on the Sanhedrin, the Council (cf. Ac 4.1ff; 5.17, 34; 23.6). Made up of 71 members; corresponding to the 70 elders appointed by Moses + the high priest.

Jesus recognizes their authority as legitimate. Therefore, the people must abide by their decisions. Nevertheless, they are not to be emulated in the personal conduct.

“They say and do not do.” They impose things upon people that they themselves are not willing to do. Not just that they are imperfect people, but they intentionally act in an opposite manner than the laws they make for others to obey.

Pharaohnic pastors (4): Should have been characterized by the humility of Moses, the one in whose seat they sat.

Binding burdens upon people’s shoulders. Cf. Ps 81.5-6; burdens on shoulders related to Egyptian bondage (cf. also Isa 9.4; 10.27). God gave Moses authority to remove burdens that Pharaoh had placed on them. They are acting like Pharaoh, not Moses.

“They themselves are not willing to move them with a finger.” May be only “they do not make the slightest effort to do the things they place upon others.”

Exodus story: finger of God. Plagues are the “finger of God” (Ex 8.19) and God writes law with his finger (Ex 31.18; Dt 9.10).

God uses his finger to give deliverance and liberating direction to his people. As God’s authorities they were to use their “finger” in the same way. Instead they weren’t moving their finger to move anything.

These men sit on the seat of Moses but they are not Moses’ true sons. They are sons of Pharaoh. It is proven by their actions.

Cp 11.28-30. Invitation to all who labor and are heavy laden. He will give them rest. His yoke is easy (i.e. that which goes on the shoulders) and his burden (same word as our passage) is light. Jesus is the true Moses.

2. ARE THEY BEING PIOUS OR SELF-PROMOTING? (5-12)

To be seen by men (5): cp. 6.1ff.; they have an air of piety but they are really corrupt.

Note: the problem is not doing works in public in itself. Cp. 5.16. Jesus’ followers are supposed to do good works in front of people with a particular purpose/goal: glorify our Father.

Difference? The motivation and goal.

Scribes and Pharisees: to make a good show before others so that they will think highly of them. Want people to think that they are faithful when they do not do what they are supposed to when they are out of sight.

They weren't concerned about actually keeping the law. They were concerned with *looking like* they kept the Law.

Broad phylacteries and enlarged tassels (5): Phylacteries = little boxes for the hand and forehead containing sections of Scripture.

A literal application of Ex 13.9, 16 & Dt 6.8. *Torah* would be as signs upon their hands and frontlets between their eyes. Jesus is condemning the way they are being and not necessarily the use of them *per se*.

“Making broad” - using them as a show piece to make people think that they are faithful to the *Torah*.

“Making long their tassels” - tassel = God-given requirement for every Jew (cf. Num 15.38f.). To be worn on the four wings/corners of their garments to cause them to remember God's commandments and do them.

Jesus had these on his garments. Cf. 9.20; 14.36

The scribes and Pharisees were using the Law in a perverted fashion to attract attention. They weren't using these things to remember the commandments so as to do them. They were using them in a way to disobey the commandments themselves.

Four loves (6): place of honor at the dinner table: closest to the host; “inner circle.”

Chief seats in the synagogues: most prominent and powerful positions.

Greetings in the marketplace: involve making a big show in the most crowded area of town; want to be seen.

Called “Rabbi” (teacher, master): love the honorific title (but don't want the responsibility that comes with it).

Titles (8-10): Is Jesus forbidding the use of these titles specifically and all titles in general? No. Cp. Paul speaking of Abraham and himself as “father.” He is also an apostle. Peter says the same thing. There are also titles for God's gifted men given to the church (cf. Eph 4.11-12).

Use of hyperbole (exaggeration to make a point). Point: Those who serve God's people, esp those who occupy particular offices/positions of authority, are all subject to higher authorities whom they are to emulate.

This means that they are to be servants. There is ultimately one Teacher, one Father, and one Leader/Instructor under whom all are to submit. We are all brothers. We may serve one another in various offices, but we remain all brothers in submission to the one God.

How to achieve greatness (11-12): Has said similar things to his disciples at other times (cf. 18.1-6; 20.20-28).

The great ones—the ones who bear the titles among his people—first and foremost bear the title “servant.” The higher they ran the greater the servant.

The authority granted is to be used among God's people in the way that God himself uses his authority: to liberate from all unnecessary and ultimately mortifying burdens.

The way to achieve greatness in the kingdom—a legitimate aspiration—is *not* through self-promotion, seeking to push your way to the top, always trying to get in the ‘inner circle.’ It is through service.

Those people who seek to exalt themselves, grasping for titles and positions of honor, will be humbled. They will be put down.

Cp. Christ. He receives the greatest title (Phil 2.9-11), but it is after he has shown himself to be the greatest servant.

1. *Authorities have the responsibility to ease as many burdens as possible, not create unnecessary, over-bearing burdens.*

2. *Titles do not in themselves make a person great. Being a servant does.*

3. *Our motivations need to be examined.*